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AUTHOR Newsham, G. S.
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ABSTRACT

The concept of gender in language encompasses three ideas: (1) sex, or classification as masculine, feminine, or neuter; (2) epicene, a proform (substitute word) whose referent is masculine or feminine; and (3) ecology, the relationship between organisms and their environment. Gender classification in language indicates that original speakers of the language divided phenomena into classes based on some criteria, varying widely with language group. English has a gender system based on the animate/inanimate distinction, even though this classification is inconsistent with current understanding of the natural environment. We could revise the gender classification system so all things in nature take the pronoun "who," and the singular and plural epicene pronoun would be "they." The only additional adjustment would be a change in restrictive/nonrestrictive pronoun use. Just as feminists have engineered some changes in language use to make people revise their views of men's and women's roles in society, ecologists could work toward changing the English language to reflect a new concern, that of a healthy relationship between humans and the rest of the world. Gender classifications are an expression of a deep cultural reality inherited from the past, and it is argued that this should not influence the understanding of the present. (MSE)

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Sex, Ecology and the Epicene

These terms appear to come from different domains and seem unrelated, but they are in fact connected. All three reflect a view of the world and all three can all be subsumed under one term: gender.

Sex , as defined in the American Heritage dictionary, is "The property or quality by which organisms are classified according to their reproductive functions". In language, 'marked for sex' means that words are classified by their form as being masculine, feminine, or neuter (**neuter** : a word coming from the Latin **ne uter** meaning **neither one**).

Epicene is a term in language for a proform (substitute word) whose referent is masculine or feminine. One epicene form in English is the pronoun **they**. The existence of an epicene form in English indicates that sex distinction exists in English words, as in, for example, **he** and **she** .

Ecology is "The science of the relationship between organisms and their environment". An organism is "any living being, either plant or animal". (American Heritage Dictionary).

The term that encompasses these three ideas, both in language and in its relationship to the world, is **gender** . **Gender** comes from the Latin word **genus** and it has the same meaning as the French word **genre** : kind or sort. Gender is "any set of two or more categories . . . into which words are divided according to sex, animation, psychological association, or some other characteristic, and that determine agreement with or selection of modifiers,

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referents, or grammatical forms." (American Heritage Dictionary). Gender classification in a language means that the original speakers of that language divided the phenomena into classes based on some principle. This principle varies with the language group and depends on how this group viewed the world. For example, the Bantu speakers have twenty-one genders in their language, some of which are:

1. names of living beings, singular
2. names of tools, parts of the body
3. names of animals, singular
4. names of animals, plural
5. names of fluids
6. names of small animals, plural
7. names of living beings, plural

An Australian language, Andiljuagwa, has nine genders:

1. names of men, equipment, tools
2. dual of above
3. names of women, their tools, some birds
4. plural of above 1-3
5. dual of 3 above
6. inanimate (the largest group)
7. sun, sea, wooden objects
8. moon, small animals
9. big animals

(Fodor, 1959, p.188)

The Ojibwa Indians of North America have a gender system which appears to be based on a living/non living distinction, but the definition of **living** is closely related to myths and folklore so that the distinction is almost impossible for someone outside the culture to understand. For example, some stones are considered to be alive, but others not. The distinction may be in their shape or their mention in myths. (Vaillancourt 1982, Hallowell 1969).

The English language has a gender system which is based on the animate/inanimate distinction. Here, however, the basis of classification is evident from the term. **Animate** means having breath, having a soul. (Latin **animus** , spirit or breath). Those organisms which breathe (as ancient peoples understood this term) are animate; everything else, including plants, is inanimate. If something is animate it can then be a person or a non person. If it is a person, it can take the pronoun **who**. If it is a non person, it takes the pronoun **which**. A person or a large animal can have sex distinctions in language in the singular (masculine-he, feminine-she). All inanimate things have no sex gender and have the pronouns **which** and **it/they** .

(Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik,1985)

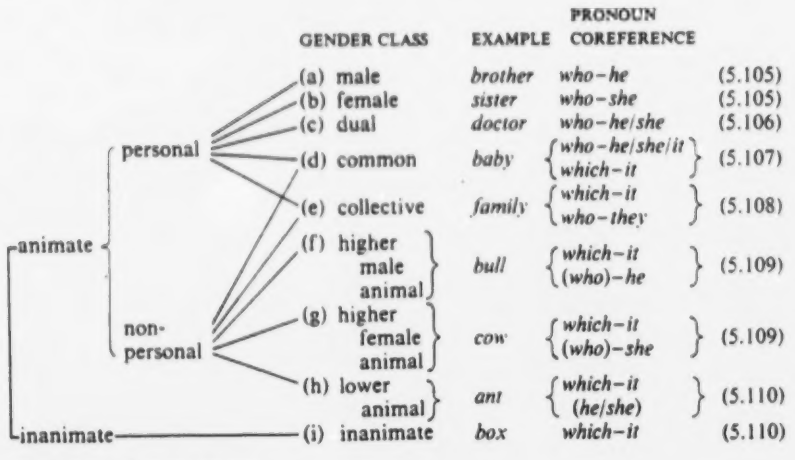
GENDER CLASS
EXAMPLE
PRONOUN COREFERENCE
animate
inanimate
personal
non-personal
(a) male — brother — who–he — (5.105)
(b) female — sister — who–she — (5.105)
(c) dual — doctor — who–he/she — (5.106)
(d) common — baby — who–he/she/it / which–it — (5.107)
(e) collective — family — which–it / who–they — (5.108)
(f) higher male animal — bull — which–it / (who)–he — (5.109)
(g) higher female animal — cow — which–it / (who)–she — (5.109)
(h) lower animal — ant — which–it / (he/she) — (5.110)
(i) inanimate — box — which–it — (5.110)

Fig 5.104 Gender classes

Some languages have anomalous sex gender classifications. That is, while masculine pronouns refer to animate male beings, and feminine pronouns to animate female beings, many other nouns are also classified as being 'masculine' or 'feminine' even though their referents have no claim to malesness or femaleness or, even to being animate. To explain this fact, many theories have arisen and many long arguments and counter arguments have been made by students of Proto-Indo-European. The theory which appears most often is that because the early word **mama** (perhaps related even to the sounds made by young animals) or the word **gwena** (bearer of children) ends in an /a/ sound, then all other words (regardless of their meaning) which ended in /a/ came to be called 'feminine'. All other words referring to animate beings were 'masculine' and words referring to non-animate things were called 'neuter'. Later on, some languages did away with neuter and kept a two class system.

Whatever the origin of the terms **masculine** and **feminine** , scholars seem to agree that the primary gender system in Proto-Indo-European is based on the distinction animate (breathing) and inanimate (not breathing).

Such a classification of world phenomena, while based on meaning, is a meaning coming from a different time and place. As we have seen, distinctions could have been made by size, shape, usefulness, or on many other qualities. However, the animate/inanimate distinction was made, and it remains today as the primary gender classification in English.

As can be seen from the diagram above, according to our gender classification, plants are in the same category as cement, for example. Should we change language forms in English which relate to animate/inanimate gender to make us change our ideas about the importance of plants in the world? And perhaps not only plants, but the earth, the air, the sea? Could we, for example, change our perceptions of the importance of our natural environment by referring to plants and animals, and all of Mother Nature's creations as who, the pronoun reserved now for humans?

In a recent address, a renowned scientist (Ursula Franklin) claimed that our culture was wrong in using the term **environment** because it means 'the things around us', thus reinforcing the idea that human beings are at the centre of things and are superior to all things, and that the rest of the world is at our disposition. We humans must, instead, accept that we are part of a whole and that we belong to nature and not the other way around.

Perhaps we should re-draw the gender classification diagram as follows:

Nature_____	who	known sex	he/they she/they
		either sex (epicene)	they/they
		unknown sex	it/they
Things made by humans_____		which	it/they

The differences from our present system would be:

1. all things in nature would take the pronoun **who**
2. the singular and plural epicene pronoun would be **they**.

Alternatively, the pronoun system could be further simplified to:

People and everything in the world	_____	that	known sex: she/he/they
			either(sex) (epicene) they/they
			unknown sex it/they

The only added adjustment from present day English would be a change in the restrictive/non restrictive use of the pronoun. (e.g., "The person **that** I know is here":restrictive, but "The person, **whom** I know, is here": non restrictive.)

We all know that language changes over time. For example, **who** as a relative pronoun in English came into use only in the sixteenth century; **that** and **which** were used earlier in Middle English (Pyles and Algeo, 1982, p. 159, p.193). But can language change be managed?

It is evident that feminists think so. They have mounted a campaign to promote changes in language so as to make people revise their views of men's and women's roles in society. The changes they want are changes in terms (e.g., **person** for **man** when the referent could be either man or woman,, and in matching pronouns: **they** or **he/she** for **person**). Their efforts have had some success. Book publishers, especially textbook publishers, have set out guidelines to monitor non-sexist language, and certainly women are now seen in roles formerly reserved for men. It is not possible to say that all of this change is due to perceptions gained through language, but it does prove that language can be engineered, and with some effect.

With this example in mind, ecologists could work towards changing the English language to make it reflect a new concern, the concern of having a healthy relationship between humans and the rest of the world. For example, new pronouns could be invented, or new uses found for existing words. These changes could be made in conjunction with alterations presently being made to reflect the changing positions of the sexes in our culture.

Another way to change the language would be through a campaign to raise people's consciousness of the concept of nature inherent in our language, and of how these concepts affect our thinking and our actions. This awareness could cause us to look at the world in a new light and, by bringing a new appreciation of nature, to change our behaviour. Our altered attitudes would become part of our culture, and, since culture affects language, English would change to reflect our realization of relationships which exist between humans and the natural world.

Gender classifications are not just something found in a grammar book. Gender classifications are an expression of a deep cultural reality inherited from the past. We must not let them influence our understanding of the present.

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